

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

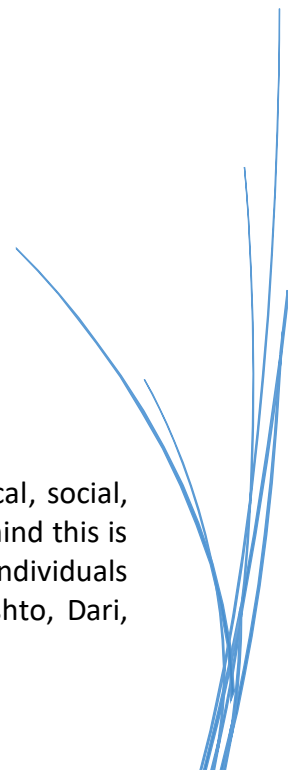
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**AN ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S THREAT-BASED POLICY TOWARD THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



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## AN ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S THREAT-BASED POLICY TOWARD THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

### Introduction

Following Donald Trump's announcement that he had sent a letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, proposing new negotiations over Iran's nuclear program—and Khamenei's firm rejection of direct talks with Washington—a new chapter of tensions opened between the United States and Iran.

In a phone interview with NBC on March 30, Trump threatened to bomb Iran if Tehran refused to reach a new agreement with Washington over the nuclear issue. This marked an unprecedented escalation in the already fragile relationship between the two countries. From the beginning, Iran's Supreme Leader had been strongly opposed to any direct dialogue with the United States, particularly under Trump's leadership. In response to Trump's threat, Khamenei stated, *"They threaten to act maliciously. I don't think anything from outside will happen, but if any aggression is launched, a firm blow will be delivered in return."*

As tensions between Washington and Tehran continued to rise, Reuters reported on April 1, 2025, that the United States had deployed six B-6 bombers to the region. Following this, the Pentagon announced that additional fighter jets were also being sent to strengthen the U.S. military presence in the area.

This situation raises several key questions: Is Trump's military threat against Iran a real possibility? Why is he placing greater emphasis on military options during this phase of his presidency? How might Iran respond to such threats from the United States? And, importantly, where does Afghanistan stand amid the rising tensions between Washington and Tehran? What position should it adopt in response to these developments?

This article examines the current state of U.S.-Iranian tensions and seeks to offer thoughtful responses to these pressing questions.

### THE JCPOA AND THE BEGINNING OF U.S.-IRAN CONFRONTATION

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Tehran has maintained tense and hostile relations with Washington. When the U.S. labeled Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as part of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002—and subsequently invaded Iraq in 2003—it sparked widespread concern in Iran that Washington might launch a military operation aimed at toppling the Islamic Republic. In response, Iran adopted a dual strategy: avoiding direct confrontation with the United States while simultaneously strengthening its regional influence



through allied groups opposed to U.S. interests. During this period, Iran also advanced its nuclear and missile programs.

This strategy of indirect engagement allowed Iran to significantly increase its regional influence, particularly after 2003. Tehran gained substantial sway over various layers of Iraq's government and society. In Lebanon, Hezbollah—backed by Iranian funding and arms—emerged as a dominant political and military force. The Arab Spring provided another opportunity for Tehran to expand its influence, notably through its alliance with the Assad regime in Syria.

Iran's growing nuclear ambitions caught the attention of the international community, especially the United States, resulting in severe economic sanctions. In 2013, Iran began nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, Russia, and China). Meanwhile, in February 2015, the Houthi movement, known as Ansar Allah and supported by Iran for years, seized power in Yemen—adding yet another country to Iran's sphere of influence in the region.

After nearly two years of intensive negotiations, Iran and the P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on July 14, 2015. Under the deal, the signatories agreed to lift economic sanctions on Iran, allowing it greater access to the global economy in return for limitations on its nuclear program.

However, critics of the JCPOA argue that the agreement would have brought Iran dangerously close to developing a nuclear bomb. With the lifting of sanctions, Iran would have gained access to vast revenues from oil sales and trade—resources that could have been used to acquire modern and lethal weaponry from various countries, including the United States. This, in turn, would have further empowered Iran's regional proxies, positioning the Islamic Republic as a major player in the Middle East.

From the critics' perspective, the JCPOA elevated Iran's status to that of a regional power and provided the means to strengthen its military and strategic reach. In effect, Washington, by signing the JCPOA, deviated from its longstanding policy of preventing the emergence of a dominant regional power in the Middle East.

Donald Trump, who entered the U.S. presidential race in 2016, was a vocal critic of the JCPOA. He argued that the agreement failed to address Iran's ballistic missile program and its destabilizing regional activities—issues he viewed as incompatible with American interests and global leadership. He repeatedly pledged that, if elected president, he would withdraw the United States from the deal.



After taking office, President Trump followed through on this promise. In May 2018, the United States formally withdrew from the JCPOA and called on Iran to return to the negotiating table to address not only its nuclear program but also its regional behavior. This decision marked the beginning of a new and more intense phase of U.S.-Iran tensions, the outcome of which remains uncertain.

### **MAXIMUM PRESSURE POLICY AND AVOIDANCE OF WAR**

After withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), Donald Trump adopted a policy of "maximum pressure" against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Under this strategy, Washington imposed some of the harshest economic sanctions in history. In response, Iran not only resisted U.S. pressure but also expanded its nuclear enrichment program and missile capabilities. Furthermore, it intensified its support and funding of proxy forces across the region.

In 2020, under Trump's direct orders, U.S. military forces assassinated General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. As retaliation, Tehran launched missile strikes against American bases in Iraq. While the missiles hit the bases and surrounding areas, the attacks caused no casualties. The killing of Soleimani significantly escalated tensions between the two nations. Trump even gave the order for a direct military strike on Iran. U.S. forces were placed on high alert. However, at the last moment, Trump reversed his decision, citing the potential loss of 150 civilian lives.

Qassem Soleimani was widely seen as the mastermind behind Iran's proxy network in the Middle East. His assassination dealt a serious shock to Iran's regional strategy and had deep consequences for the Islamic Republic. Despite maintaining the maximum pressure policy until the end of his presidency, Trump never authorized a limited or full-scale military strike on Iran. While he publicly justified backing down from military action as a humanitarian concern, the real reason was strategic: in 2020, the regional circumstances made any military confrontation far too costly for the United States.

At that time, U.S. forces were already overstretched in what even American leaders called "endless wars" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Opening a new front in Iran without first ending those conflicts would have been strategically unwise. Moreover, by 2020, Iran had amassed around 3,000 long-range and ballistic missiles, according to then CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie. These missiles were capable of striking any location or government across the Middle East. Iran-aligned forces held significant or complete power in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other parts of the region.

In the context of rising tensions, a major event underscored the risks of military escalation: in 2019, Yemen's Houthi rebels, reportedly using missiles supplied by Iran, targeted Saudi



Arabia's Aramco oil facilities. This attack made it clear that any American strike on Iran would not remain a contained conflict. It would likely set off a regional war, with one of the immediate consequences being a major disruption in the global oil supply.

By that point, Trump had already begun shifting U.S. regional policy. He initiated direct talks with the Taliban and signed the Doha Agreement, laying the groundwork for a full withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Similarly, he had reduced U.S. military presence in Iraq and Syria. However, his electoral defeat in 2020 left his broader regional strategy incomplete.

When Joe Biden entered the White House in 2021, many hoped he would shift away from Trump's Iran policy, rejoin the nuclear deal, and end the maximum pressure campaign. However, Biden did not re-enter the JCPOA nor did he lift the sanctions. Instead, he pursued a similar strategy in a more diplomatic and softer tone—arguably with even more intensity.

During Biden's term, several developments worked in Washington's favor. Following the terms of the Doha Agreement, the U.S. fully withdrew from Afghanistan, effectively ending what it had called its "forever wars." Then, a powerful protest movement erupted in Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody. Branded as the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, it quickly evolved into one of the most significant waves of unrest in the country's recent history. The White House and U.S. media outlets openly supported the protests.

Although the Iranian government was eventually able to suppress the movement, it revealed growing public dissatisfaction with the regime. This was clearly reflected in the 2023 Iranian presidential election, where, according to official figures, only 40% of eligible voters participated—the lowest turnout since the Islamic Revolution, by the government's own admission.

#### **THE AL-AQSA FLOOD AND THE DECLINE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S REGIONAL INFLUENCE**

The Al-Aqsa Flood and the subsequent Israeli assault on Gaza constituted one of the most significant developments to occur just prior to Donald Trump's return to the White House for a second term. From the outset of the Al-Aqsa Flood, the Islamic Republic of Iran denied any involvement in the attack and, to this day, has limited its support to verbal and diplomatic backing. However, Israel has consistently accused the Islamic Republic of being the principal architect of the operation, alleging that Tehran provided both financial and military support to Hamas. As a result, Iran became deeply implicated in the issue of Hamas.

Following the Al-Aqsa Flood, the United States not only reinforced its military presence in the region but also positioned itself firmly alongside Israel through the provision of military, arms, and economic assistance.



On April 1, 2024, Israeli military forces launched an airstrike on Iran's consulate in Syria. In retaliation, Iran fired 300 long-range ballistic missiles at Israeli territory. Although the United States and its allies intercepted approximately 99% of these missiles before they reached their targets, the Islamic Republic's direct attack on Israel marked a significant departure from its traditional policy of avoiding direct military confrontation with Israel and the United States. This event brought Iran and Israel into open and direct military opposition.

Subsequently, Israel assassinated Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's political bureau, in Tehran. Then, on September 27, 2024, Israeli forces targeted a Hezbollah hideout in Lebanon, killing Hassan Nasrallah, the group's leader. In response, Iran launched a second wave of attacks on Israel using 200 missiles and drones. Once again, Washington intercepted these missiles mid-air, demonstrating its continued ability to neutralize Iran's missile threats before they could reach their intended targets.

### **TRUMP AND THE THREAT OF MILITARY CONFRONTATION**

During Donald Trump's second term in office, the regional dynamics have shifted significantly in favor of Washington. The United States is no longer entangled in any protracted conflicts in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic is grappling with a legitimacy crisis within Iran. Following the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, Tehran has thus far failed to reconstitute the leadership structure of Hezbollah. Additionally, after the recent developments in Syria that culminated in the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Iran has effectively lost its strategic foothold in Syria, alongside Lebanon.

According to Western media reports, after the Islamic Republic's second missile attack on Israel, it will take Iran at least a year to restore its missile capabilities. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has normalized diplomatic relations with Iran, thereby diminishing the possibility that, in the event of a U.S.–Iran confrontation, Tehran might disrupt global oil supplies by attacking Saudi energy infrastructure.

These developments have emboldened Trump to adopt a more aggressive posture toward the Islamic Republic compared to his first term. He has now intensified efforts to compel Iran to either re-enter negotiations or face the possibility of military confrontation. The Islamic Republic, however, continues to resist U.S. pressure, citing a deep-seated distrust of Washington on the one hand, and the unconventional and overtly coercive manner in which Trump has extended his invitation to talks on the other. Thus far, Iran has demonstrated a strong unwillingness to submit to U.S. demands.



Perceiving the regional balance as favorable, Trump has sought to escalate pressure by deploying an unprecedented concentration of American military forces to the region, effectively issuing a direct threat of military action against the Islamic Republic.

Whether Trump truly intends to launch an attack on Iran remains uncertain. If such an attack were to occur, would it take the form of a full-scale military operation, a limited tactical strike, or something similar to 2020, would Washington ultimately retreat from the brink at the last moment? These are pressing questions, yet definitive answers remain elusive at present.

Nevertheless, what can be reasonably anticipated is the following:

**First**, while a military strike at any scale would be an extremely high-risk option, it cannot be ruled out.

**Second**, even if the United States ultimately refrains from a direct military assault for strategic or political reasons, the region is nonetheless likely to enter a new phase of heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran, one in which the military option will remain a persistent and viable element on the table in the Oval Office.

#### **IRAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON TRUMP'S THREATS**

Despite the regional shifts in recent years that have led to a decline in the Islamic Republic's influence, Iran is unlikely to yield easily to U.S. threats for three key reasons:

**First**, the personality cult surrounding Donald Trump. From the perspective of Iranian officials, Trump is fundamentally a businessman who prefers negotiation and is unwilling to undertake actions that would impose disproportionate costs on the United States relative to the expected benefits. Trump's decision to refrain from launching a military attack on Iran in 2019, citing concerns over civilian casualties, is viewed by Iranian officials as evidence supporting this assessment.

**Second**, prevailing international and regional conditions do not favor the initiation of another war by the United States. Washington is already deeply entangled in the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza. Furthermore, the possibility of China opening a new front by launching a military operation against Taiwan cannot be entirely ruled out. In such a scenario, Iranian officials believe the U.S. would neither be able to resolve the Ukraine crisis nor effectively counter China if it were to simultaneously initiate a military confrontation with Iran.

**Third**, from the viewpoint of Iranian policymakers, Washington is unlikely to repeat its failed military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq by engaging in another protracted war in the region—one that could potentially engulf the broader Middle East. This sentiment has been echoed by Mohammad Javad Zarif, the former foreign minister under President Hassan





Rouhani and deputy to Massoud Pezeshkian, who signed the JCPOA (nuclear agreement) during his tenure. In one of his speeches, Zarif explicitly stated that since 2004, the United States has refrained from using military force to pursue foreign policy goals and has shown no interest in initiating a war aimed at toppling a regional government. Similarly, the recent remarks by Iran's Supreme Leader suggesting that external threats of military aggression are unlikely further corroborate this assessment.

Although Iranian officials are unlikely to succumb to U.S. threats, the possibility of entering into negotiations with Washington cannot be dismissed altogether. Due to Trump's unconventional and confrontational rhetoric, Iranian leaders may avoid direct, public negotiations. However, indirect dialogue through third-party channels remains a plausible pathway.

### **AFGHANISTAN'S POSITION IN THE U.S.-IRAN TENSIONS**

From the onset of tensions between the United States and Iran, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has adopted a stance of neutrality. Nevertheless, in a recent and unexpected move—absent of sufficient evidence or documentation, the U.S. Department of State labeled the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as one of Iran's regional proxy forces.

This accusation appears to be rooted in Afghanistan's refusal to comply with any of Washington's demands since the Islamic Emirate came to power, and its consistent resistance to U.S. pressure. Given the current geopolitical context—particularly the increased military deployment of U.S. forces in the region—Washington may be attempting to draw Afghanistan into the broader U.S.-Iran confrontation. Such a maneuver seems aimed at applying psychological pressure on the Islamic Emirate in hopes of compelling it to yield to American demands.

However, based on the Islamic Emirate's consistent behavior over the past four years, such expectations are likely illusory.

### **CONCLUSION**

In May 2018, President Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and called for renegotiation, urging the Islamic Republic of Iran to engage in a new agreement with Washington. Since then, Trump has repeatedly threatened military action against Iran should it refuse to comply. In 2019, Trump fully prepared for a strike on Iran but ultimately refrained. At present, the threat of military action appears primarily aimed at instilling fear among Iranian officials to pressure them into negotiations on U.S. terms.

Given the regional developments in recent years, the possibility of limited military operations—such as the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in 2019—cannot be ruled out.



However, what remains clear is that tensions between Washington and Tehran will not dissipate anytime soon. This ongoing confrontation is expected to define the regional political paradigm for years to come.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Iran as a Neighbor:** Iran, as Afghanistan's western neighbor, shares deep cultural, linguistic, and historical ties. Thus, any significant development in Iran is likely to influence Afghanistan's domestic environment.
2. **Positive Engagement:** The Islamic Emirate should continue its policy of constructive engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran, grounded in mutual respect.
3. **U.S. Influence:** The United States remains a key actor in Afghan affairs and currently poses the main obstacle to the recognition of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.
4. **Avoiding Confrontation:** Any confrontation between the Islamic Emirate and the United States could yield detrimental consequences for both sides.
5. **Maintaining Positive Neutrality:** In order to shield Afghanistan from the adverse effects of Washington–Tehran tensions, the Islamic Emirate should maintain its current policy of positive neutrality.

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**Contact Us:**

Email: [info@csrsaf.org](mailto:info@csrsaf.org)

Website: [www.csrsaf.org](http://www.csrsaf.org)

Phone & WhatsApp: +93780618000

